

McGill University's most infamous medical graduate

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During the past two years McGill University has received several requests for information about Thomas Neill Cream (1850-1892), a man who may fairly be regarded as McGill's most infamous medical graduate. These requests were prompted by the recent publication of a biographical sketch of Cream in Richard D. Altick's "Victorian Studies in Scarlet."¹ However, Cream has long been a notorious figure and Altick's sketch is based on an account which appeared 50 years ago as a volume in the "Notable British Trials" series.²

Thomas Neill Cream was born in Glasgow on May 27, 1850 and came to Canada with his parents in 1854 or 1855. The records of his childhood are meagre and nothing is known of the circumstances which moulded his early years. In the autumn of 1872 Cream enrolled as a medical student at McGill University. There is no evidence that he proved an especially brilliant student. On the other hand, there is also no evidence that he had any difficulty in successfully completing all the requirements. He received the degree of Doctor of Medicine and Master of Surgery from McGill University on March 31, 1876. On that occasion a valedictory address was delivered by one of Cream's teachers, Thomas G. Roddick, Professor of Clinical Surgery. In this address Roddick said, "I stand here, Gentleman, on this account more than on any other to implore you in the name and for the sake of this great University, in the name and for the

sake of our common humanity, on behalf of all that is near and dear to yourselves, to pursue a course of prudence, sobriety and honour."³ It is tempting to speculate on the thoughts which Cream may have had as he heard Roddick's words but probably he paid no attention to this piece of rhetoric. In any event, following graduation Cream embarked on what has been described as a "terrible career of debauchery and crime."²

To summarize this career briefly, Cream became involved in a variety of criminal activities, of which the most serious was the murder of young women by poisoning with strychnine. In 1881, only five years after graduation, he was convicted of murder in a Chicago court and sentenced to life imprisonment. In 1891, after serving 10 years of his term, he was released, went to England and promptly resumed his life of crime. The next year (1892) he was tried at the Central Criminal Court, Old Bailey, found guilty of murder and sentenced to be hanged. He was executed at Newgate, November 15, 1892.

In his biographical sketch Altick, after referring to Cream's conviction in 1881, states "McGill at this early point in his career foresightedly washed its hands of him by striking his name from its alumni roll."¹ This statement appears to be based on a footnote in Shore's account² recording that "when Cream was convicted at Chicago in 1881 his name was removed from the [McGill] Register." No doubt McGill would have been glad to wash its hands of Thomas Neill Cream but in fact it never managed to do so. His name was not struck from the alumni roll. It appears in the 1924 McGill Directory of Graduates, the last to include de-

ceased as well as living graduates. Furthermore, the files of the Registrar, the Archivist and the Medical Faculty of McGill University contain no hint that Cream's medical degree was revoked. On the contrary, his name remains with those of his classmates in the various registers of graduates. Whether or not McGill should or could have revoked his degree might form the subject of an interesting debate. If it can be established that a degree has been obtained under false pretences, as for example by the use of forged documents, the University would certainly declare the degree null and void. But

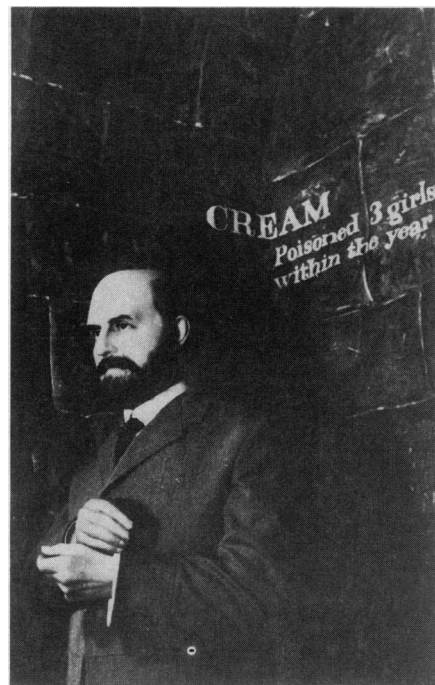


FIG. 1—Likeness of Thomas Neill Cream in the Chamber of Horrors at Madame Tussaud's. Courtesy Madame Tussaud's, London, England.

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when Cream graduated in 1876, he had apparently earned his degree honestly. It may be argued that under this circumstance a graduate should be allowed to retain the degree and remain on the roll of alumni in spite of serious misconduct after graduation. Whatever opinion may be held now, it must be concluded that Cream went to the gallows still in possession of his M.D., C.M. and with the privilege of being addressed as "Doctor".*

Well enough known in his lifetime, Cream acquired further notoriety after his execution not only by the eventual publication of a detailed account of his life and final trial at Old Bailey,² but even more by his admission to the Chamber of Horrors of Madame Tussaud's Exhibition in London, England (Fig. 1). For over 70 years he stood there but now has been removed from the Chamber.⁴ His place has been taken by others of greater interest to the public. With the passage of time and the spread of violence in so many forms and often on such a vast scale, Cream's

infamous career has become no more than a minor incident in the long and continuing history of crime.

My thanks are offered to Dr. A. D. Kelly who first drew my attention to Altick's biographical sketch of Cream and suggested an investigation of the possibility that Cream's medical degree had been revoked by McGill University.

*A clear distinction must of course be made between possession of the academic degree and the right to practise medicine. The latter is conferred by a local licensing body and can be revoked at any time for misconduct less grievous than murder. This problem did not arise in Cream's place of residence at graduation. The College of Physicians and Surgeons of the Province of Quebec has no record of the granting of a licence to Thomas Neill Cream.

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structure one's self in terms of "time left to live rather than time since birth"¹ and an acceptance that time is finite. It has been said that "emotional, including sexual, fulfilment with love is a gift that can grow with age. Its loss or the awareness of non-fulfilment can lead to despair in the older person which in turn may be masked by severe psychological or psychosomatic symptoms. Often therapy of a listening and understanding kind is sufficient to release the older patient from the torment of an emotional bind from which he or she feels there is no escape. Often a great deal more can be done by the physician with a trained ear and a sensitive heart".⁴

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Department of Psychiatry, for his helpful advice and encouragement in the preparation of this paper.

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